

The African Standby Force, Sub-regional Commands, and African Militaries

By Stephen Burgess, US Air War College

Will the sub-regional commands of the ASF ever be fully implemented?

In 2003, the African Chiefs of Defence and Security (ACDS) set goals for full ASF implementation by 2010.¹ In each of the five sub-regions, commands would be fully subscribed at the brigade level (5,000 troops per brigade), supported by civilian police, and ready for rapid deployment in Africa and abroad. Sub-regional ASF leadership would establish command and control over each of the five standby brigades as well as communications and intelligence capabilities and planning elements (PLANELMs). The African Union (AU) Peace and Security Council (PSC) and Commission would establish command and control over the five ASF brigades (25,000 troops) and civilian components as well as communications and intelligence. Thus, the PSC would be able to override ASF decisions made at the sub-regional level. Also, full implementation would entail the five sub-regions developing rapid deployment capabilities (RDCs) of approximately 1,500 troops each for a total of 7,500 that could deploy within 14 days.

By 2010, the ASF would be able to meet the challenges of six scenarios laid out by the ACDS. The most challenging include: (4) AU peacekeeping and preventive deployment within 30 days of a mandate; (5) a multidimensional peacekeeping operation, including the possibility of enforcement, with the military component deploying in 30 days and the entire mission in 90 days; and (6) deployment of a robust military presence in 14 days to stop a genocide. For the ACDS, the most important (and challenging) scenario was the sixth – to stop another genocide as occurred in Rwanda in 1994.

Full implementation of the ASF sub-regional commands implies the development of a number of other capabilities; these include airlift as well as sealift and ground transportation to dispatch the rapid deployment units and main ASF brigades and their equipment to conflict zone areas and re-supply them. Considerable logistics and maintenance capabilities are required to sustain the brigades on a multinational basis. Interoperability, including interoperable communications, is required for the brigades to achieve unity of effort in the field. Intelligence capabilities would be needed to allow the brigades operate effectively in their areas of responsibility. Under scenarios five and six, the ASF requires counter-insurgency capabilities to defeat spoilers. Full implementation also means full cost bearing by each of the sub-regional commands and their member states. Effective command and control by sub-regional organizations and force commanders over the brigades requires combined training exercises plus sound communications with sub-regional headquarters and the AU Peace and Security Commission. The sub-regional brigades are charged with developing the ability to deploy field level headquarters that take orders from the AU mission planning cell in Addis Ababa. All of these capabilities are presently lacking to one degree or another.

How far do the sub-regional commands have to go to achieve full implementation?

In regard to the requirement of sub-regional standby brigades with 5,000 troops and some degree of command and control and interoperability, the ECOWAS brigade (ECOBRIg) appears to have proceeded the farthest. The ECOBRIg has managed to designate the

¹ Jakkie Cilliers, *The African Standby Force: An Update on Progress*, The Institute for Security Studies (South Africa) Occasional Paper 160, March 2008, pages 1-19.

requisite number of 5,000 troops as standing by and has developed command and control mechanisms and a planning element (PLANELM) with donor assistance. The ECOWAS Peace and Security Commission inspectors have visited the components to confirm that they are on standby. A high readiness component has been formed which can deploy within 30 days under Nigerian leadership.² Training needs analysis has been accomplished, and a logistics center has been designated. Combined command level exercises have been held. Centers of excellence have been established at the strategic, operational and tactical levels for education and training.

ECOBIG shortfalls are considerable. Cost bearing is a long-term goal, and donors will continue to play a large role in sustaining and developing many of the institutions, including the provision of military personnel and contractors. It is still uncertain how much command and control ECOWAS actually has over ECOBIG during an operation.³ Interoperability, including communications, is a work in progress, and intelligence capabilities are in the process of development. Logistics and maintenance will be a challenge to manage and sustain and will require long-term donor assistance. There are still a number of positions at the ECOWAS Secretariat that remain unfilled, especially on the civilian side. The police component is under-subscribed. In regard to airlift, there are not many assets in ECOWAS, and sealift and ground transportation are underdeveloped.

The SADC brigade (SADCBIG) has only partially met the total of 5,000 troops standing by.⁴ A PLANELM and a center of excellence have been established.⁵ South Africa and Botswana can provide airlift, and South Africa sealift within the sub-region. Thanks to South Africa, prospects for cost bearing are better than in the other sub-regions. The shortfalls in the SADCBIG are due to delays in implementation as much as a shortage of resources. When operations are underway, it is still uncertain how much command and control SADC will have, though South African leadership may help overcome this problem. Interoperable communications are a work in progress, and intelligence capabilities are in the process of development. Logistics and a logistics center will be a challenge to maintain and will require South African leadership and donor assistance. There are still a number of positions at the SADC Secretariat that related to the SADCBIG that remain unfilled. In particular, the civilian component for multidimensional peacekeeping and peacebuilding is underdeveloped. Donors still play a role in sustaining relevant SADC organs and the SADCBIG.

The East African brigade (EASBIG) has experienced delays partly due to the lack of a sub-regional organization that encompasses the entire region and because of competition between the two “anchor states”, Ethiopia and Kenya. The sub-regional command (EASBRICOM) and the PLANELM were established in Nairobi, Kenya in 2007, while much of EASBIG headquarters and logistics will be based in Addis Ababa. On a positive note, East African Community (EAC) forces from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda have been working for a decade to develop interoperability. However, problems

² The ECOBIG high readiness force, (consisting of 2,773 troops) which can deploy in 30 days, is technically not a Rapid Reaction Force, which is supposed to deploy in 14 days.

³ Nigerian leadership may assist in the establishment of effective command and control.

⁴ Several SADC countries have already deployed troops to Darfur and elsewhere that would normally count as standby forces.

⁵ The SADC Center of Excellence is based in Zimbabwe, which is experiencing an economic and political meltdown.

remain, as donors sustain much of the EASBRIG and supply military advisers and contractors. Developing cooperation between Ethiopia and Kenya remains a work in progress and slows the building of the brigade and command and control. Also, two of the most conflict-ridden countries in Africa, Sudan and Somalia, are in Eastern African and pose daunting challenges to the sub-region.

Central Africa (ECCAS) has made advances with French assistance. The basis for progress was the French-led peace and stability operation in Central African Republic (CAR) in the late 1990s. On this basis, the Multinational Forces of Central Africa (FOMAC) were formed, which basically functions as the sub-regional standby brigade. France sustains FOMAC and other organs and helps provide command and control. Without substantial French involvement, Central African contributions to the ASF and command and control would be uncertain. There is a chronic lack of internally generated resources in ECCAS for sub-regional brigade development. Finally, the Central African sub-region is confronted with several states that are in crisis (Chad, CAR, and Democratic Republic of the Congo), which are a major distraction.

After a slow start, the Northern Brigade has made progress. Libya and Egypt have stepped forward with the North African Regional Capability (NARC). The PLANELM is based in Libya. In the North, progress has been hampered by a lack of multilateral cooperation in the region exemplified by the Algerian-Moroccan standoff over Western Sahara.

Most of the sub-regional brigades should be able to react successfully on Scenarios 1, 2, and 3, which mainly involve observation. In regard to Scenario 4 (peacekeeping and preventive deployment), the ECOBRIG could probably be deployed within 30 days and sustained with external assistance. Eventually, the other sub-regional brigades should be able to do so as well. In regard to Scenario 5 (multidimensional peacekeeping), the ASF sub-regional brigades are more deficient. Most prominently, the ASF brigades lack enforcement and counterinsurgency capabilities, as well as civilian components, including police and administration, for multidimensional peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

In regard to Scenario 6 – stopping genocide – there is no way in which the ASF will have the capability in 2010 or even 2020. Full implementation means the political will to intervene in genocide situations. The will and capabilities to stop genocide will require an outside power, such as the United States, Britain or France and perhaps a regional hegemon, such as Nigeria or South Africa, to decide to intervene and to take on most of the burden. A multinational force will be unable to achieve the unity of effort to deploy and stop genocide. African militaries lack enforcement and counterinsurgency capabilities to stop genocide. Early warning mechanisms may mean that the Rapid Development Capabilities (RDC) will not have to be in a high state of readiness for prolonged periods and might be able to react within 14 days.

The operational cases of African peacekeepers in conflict zones - Darfur (AMIS), Somalia (AMISOM) - are not encouraging. AMIS was undersubscribed with only a few thousand peacekeepers without helicopters or other mobility, which meant that the mission was ineffectual for four years.⁶ In 2008, the UN established a hybrid mission which will enable the force to expand to the recommended level of 26,000 troops.

⁶ The AU mission in Darfur, which the European Union heavily assisted, led EU officials to become disenchanted with the AU and led some to question the value of contributing to the AU Peace Facility.

AMSIOM was even worse, with only 1,500 troops deploying, and the mission must be considered a failure. Other relevant examples include Côte d'Ivoire in 2002, where ECOWAS forces were inadequate to stabilize the situation in the wake of civil war; French forces enforced a cease-fire. ECOWAS in Liberia in 2003 intervened in the wake of a cease-fire with backup from 2,000 US Marines and had to quickly handover to a UN mission, which could build up the peacekeeping force and sustain it.

In sum, the preceding inventory and analysis confirm that the sub-regional commands have a long way to go to full implementation. In fact, one must conclude that it is highly doubtful that the sub-regional commands will ever be fully implemented.

Why the ASF and sub-regional brigades will not be fully implemented.

The fundamental problem for the ASF is a lack of resources and a lack of sustainability. Future economic growth may provide some African states with greater resources for possible use in building the ASF and sub-regional brigades. However, this will still leave the ASF and its brigades short on the type of resources to fully develop and be self-sufficient and be successful in all six scenarios, especially five and six. Most African states will lack the political will to intervene in conflict zones to enforce peace and stop genocide. More specifically, airlift, logistics and maintenance are difficult for poor countries lacking trained personnel to develop. Most small militaries will not be able to afford maintaining standby units and keeping them in a state of readiness for extended periods. There is the possibility that donor fatigue will arise and that ASF structures and functions will atrophy.⁷

The challenges of building militarily effective multinational brigades that can enforce peace are nearly impossible. Comparing the AU and ASF in resource-poor Africa with the resource-rich European Union and NATO demonstrate that resources are not sufficient to develop and sustain multinational forces and the commitment that can lead to effective interventions in conflict zones, such as Afghanistan in this decade and in Bosnia during the ethnic cleansing from 1992-5.⁸ Political will and force projection capabilities are the missing ingredients that can only be provided by the United States, Britain and France.

Will the ASF sub-regional commands be a force for greater regional military regional cooperation and response?

In terms of **cooperation**, the sub-regional commands have proven to be of value. The process of developing sub-regional planning and command and control has provided military officers with cooperative experience that could lead to deeper integration. Combined training and exercises have built cooperation as well as adding an element of healthy competition among contingents. Deployment to permissive environments has provided combined, cooperative operational experience.⁹

In terms of **response**, the sub-regional commands will be a modest force, especially in the more challenging scenarios and conflict zones. The experiences of AU

⁷ It is unfortunate that another Rwandan or Darfur genocide may be required to regenerate donor interest.

⁸ Only with US leadership were they able to stop the same from happening in Kosovo in 1999. In contrast, while resource poor countries are less capable, they have greater salience to intervene.

⁹ However, deployment to non-permissive environments, such as Darfur and Somalia, can demoralize militaries and harm cooperation.

forces in Darfur and Somalia as well as those of ECOWAS Liberia (2003) and Côte d'Ivoire demonstrate the limitations on the response of the commands. Some brigades will be more effective than others. ECOWAS and ECOBRIG appear to be better organized, led and planned, but they have not proven their effectiveness yet. SADC and SADCBRIG with South African leadership will probably be even more effective if the level of commitment continues to increase. EASBRIG suffers from the detachment of Ethiopia from the countries of the East African Community. ECCAS relies on France, which has led to effective response in CAR.

Salience is important; if deployment is within the sub-region, high salience will motivate the brigades to respond more effectively than if deployed outside of the sub-region. If regional military cooperation develops and flourishes, as perhaps in the case of ECOWAS and ECOBRIG, sub-regional capability to deal with some of the more challenging scenarios, requiring enforcement, will be enhanced.

Conclusion

From an optimistic perspective, the ASF and the sub-regional commands are a concept that will help African militaries to develop cooperation and operational capabilities. The concept provides targets for African countries and their militaries to work towards and achieve. The structure seems militarily sound. If the goals are achieved, Africa would be largely self-reliant in security. Also, there are signs that conflict in Africa is declining after an exceptionally bloody period in the 1990s and early 2000s. Therefore, the need for an ASF and sub-regional brigades will not be as great as in the past. However, there are chronically unstable states such as Somalia, Sudan, DRC, and CAR that will continue to pose problems that the ASF will not be able to meet.

On the negative side, one must question if this is the way that African militaries should be organized and led in peace and stability operations. Given the scarcity of resources and dependence on donors and the likelihood of more internal conflict in weak African states, the ASF and the sub-regional commands are not sustainable and will not be for a very considerable period of time to come. Donor fatigue will eventually pose problems for the ASF. The ASF represents a diversion of scarce resources and time that Africa and its militaries could invest in alternative methods for enhancing African security. The ASF may make African militaries more cosmopolitan and more communicative with each other, but it will not make them dramatically more capable operationally. The lack of logistics, airlift and training prevents operational progress. Also, it is easier to maintain national units rather than a multinational force with elaborate command and control and planning mechanisms.

Resources being spent on ASF sub-regional brigades and the AU Peace and Security Commission could be used to better effect on developing the capability of the armed forces of individual states to serve in UN peacekeeping missions. A greater number of highly effective national battalions and brigades could be developed that could be deployed, supported and commanded by the UN. Most UN operations have a proven record of sustainment and resolution of many African conflicts followed by peacebuilding. The UN has the resources based on financial contributions of developed member states and combine developed country military resources and developing country troops. A related option would be to train the battalions of the most effective African

militaries, such as Rwanda's, which would ensure the deployment of more capable African brigades.¹⁰

In regard to Scenario 6, stopping genocide, a problem for the UN and the Permanent Five is the lack of political will to stop genocide and the reluctance of China and Russia to authorize intervention in the internal affairs of member states. However, political will is also lacking in Africa, as has been demonstrated by the cases of Rwanda, Darfur and Zimbabwe. Furthermore, the ASF goal of stopping genocide provides the United States, Britain and France (with the most capable militaries) the excuse not to act (as was the case with Darfur). If the United States and Britain had intervened in Darfur in 2004 as initially promised, the entire ASF concept would look quite different.

Ultimately, priority should be placed on effectiveness with dependence on the UN and the West rather than suboptimal security with self-reliance through the ASF. The ASF should remain a long-term goal – perhaps by 2020 or 2030. African peacekeepers would continue to be deployed with the authorization of the AU or sub-regional organizations before being taken over by the UN. The UN would continue to assume control over the operations.

The ASF goal to be fully operational by 2010 reflects the African tendency to set unattainable goals. This can be seen in the 2015 target for achieving the Millennium Development Goals for Africa. It can also be seen in unrealistic goals for the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD), especially the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM). Challenging timetables may prod African militaries to develop, but they also lead to unrealistic expectations, which can result in suboptimal performance, such as in Darfur and Somalia. The alternative is realistic strategic concepts and placing scarce resources where they will be the most effective.

¹⁰ However, more trained Rwandan battalions could skew the balance of power in East and Central Africa and could harm civil-military relations inside Rwanda.